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Speaker 1:

Welcome to the NCJA Podcast. This podcast series explores promising practices, provides guidance on strategic planning, and discusses how the Byrne Justice Assistance Grant Program, or Byrne J, contributes to improving justice systems across the country. We hope you enjoy it.

Gillian Caplan:

Thank you so much for joining us today, on our NCJA Podcast series. My name is Gillian Caplan, and I'm a program manager at NCJ.

Gillian Caplan:

Today, we're going to be discussing Connecticut's, York Correctional Institution's, WORTH Unit. For this episode, I am joined by Undersecretary Marc Pelka of Connecticut's Office of Policy and Management, and Warden Trina Sexton, and Captain Anna Lussier, from the Connecticut Department of Corrections. Thank you all, so much, for being here.

Gillian Caplan:

I would love to start by first hearing a little bit about each of your backgrounds, and then we can dive right into the questions. Undersecretary Pelka, would you like to start?

Marc Pelka:

Yes, thank you. And thank you to the listeners for joining us today.

Marc Pelka:

My name is Marc Pelka, Undersecretary of Criminal Justice Policy and Planning. And our agency hosts both the State Administering Agency, and the Statistical Analysis Center, for the state of Connecticut. Which makes me a proud, State Administering Agency director. And thus, a member of the National Criminal Justice Association.

Marc Pelka:

And it's a thrill to be with you all, today, to describe this innovative investment of Byrne JAG funding in Connecticut.

Trina Sexton:

Hi, good afternoon. I'm Trina Sexton. I am the warden at New York Correctional. It is the state's only facility for woman, both juvenile and adults. I am entering into my 13th year of corrections.

Trina Sexton:

And thank you for having me here. Thank you.

Anna Lussier:

I am Captain Anna Lussier. And I have been with the Department of Corrections for fourteen-and-a-half years. I was recently promoted to Captain of the WORTH Unit, and I have been there since its inception, which began in 2018.

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Gillian Caplan:

Thank you so much. Like I said before, we're really excited to have you here, today.

Gillian Caplan:

Undersecretary Pelka, we'll start with you. Can you briefly describe the WORTH Unit? Where the idea came from? And how the idea came to fruition?

Marc Pelka:

Sure. The idea for the WORTH Unit originated from the former Department of Correction commissioner's trip to Germany. The German model for incarcerating young adults embraced rehabilitative and restorative justice approaches. To appreciate the difference in approaches between Europe and the U.S., on the large scale, members of the Connecticut delegation traveled abroad to see the model, first hand.

Marc Pelka:

In partnership with the VERA Institute of Justice, the principles and practices of the German model were utilized to inform the development of the TRUE Unit at Connecticut's Cheshire Correctional Institution. The program incorporated an age responsive approach for 18 to 25-year-old, incarcerated young men. Programs and interventions were developed, based on research that showed brain development continues well past attaining the age of majority.

Marc Pelka:

After the development of the TRUE Unit, Connecticut's focus shifted to how this innovative approach could benefit incarcerated young women. The Connecticut Department of Correction, and the VERA Institute of Justice, then developed the concept for the first specialized unit for 18 to 25-year-old young women. The unit incorporated similar aspects of the TRUE Unit, yet, with both an age responsive and gender responsive focus.

Marc Pelka:

Connecticut's, York Correctional Institution, celebrated the opening of the WORTH Unit on July 9th, 2018. This specialized WORTH Unit, which stands for Women Overcoming Recidivism Through Hard Work, is the first of its kind, allowing incarcerated young women the opportunity to serve their period of incarceration in a restorative community, with a strong emphasis on in-unit treatment and programming, and restoring living practices, to prepare for their return to the community.

Gillian Caplan:

Fantastic.

Gillian Caplan:

And I would like to just ask, really quickly, how did the Byrne JAG funding help to built this WORTH Unit?

Marc Pelka:

Great question. Well, the story really begins in 2015, when the Connecticut Department of Correction joined that delegation that traveled to Germany to learn firsthand about European approaches to

corrections, and vice-versa, through the exchange. Correction leaders from states across the country have joined similar U.S., European exchanges, including the Netherlands and Norway, revealing different approaches to corrections.

Marc Pelka:

Participants in the program observed a criminal justice system abroad, with shorter sentences, and great emphasis on personal dignity and rehabilitation, on the whole. And the Connecticut Department of Correction returned stateside, and immediately went to work on launching the two units to embody the German approach, and focus on the young adult population between the ages of 18 and 25, with a plan to expand this proof of concept, more broadly, within the correction system. Obviously, putting the concept into practice requires attending to some of the financial needs associated with the program.

Marc Pelka:

And now the TRUE Unit serves young men, and the WORTH Unit serves young women. The age demographic doesn't necessarily fit neatly into the under 18 juvenile population, or the over 18 adult population. It faces challenges in a correctional environment too; it is subject to a higher rate of disciplinary measures, it has a higher recidivism rate relative to older populations, it has a great need for services. And brain development develops well beyond the teen years, into the early to mid 20s age range. During those years, young adults' brains continue to form, and develop capabilities to manage impulsivity and risk taking, regulation of emotions, and other behaviors.

Marc Pelka:

So, within these two units, TRUE and WORTH, Connecticut sought to do more than create a program, we wanted to establish an entirely new housing unit; a different experience, altogether, for the young adults living there; applying elements of that German model. Now, efforts to launch those two units within the envisioned time period, encountered financial challenges. By 2017, while the TRUE Program had gone live, the WORTH Unit needed additional unbudgeted support to get off the ground. In 2018, Byrne JAG funding came through to provide crucial investment for specialized training and orientation to the correction professionals, as well the mentors and the mentees, in WORTH, at the York Correctional Institution.

Marc Pelka:

So, using Byrne JAG, Connecticut infused within the WORTH curricula and training, applying both the latest science in young adult brain development, and gender informed services. The curriculum emphasized cognitive behavioral interventions, soft and hard skill development, substance use and mental health treatment, and pro-social skills. The curricula and the training met WORTH's needs by providing a team-oriented approach in the housing unit, in which all personnel interacting with the young adults, whether they were administrators or treatment providers or custody staff, could receive consistent, free, and in-service training.

Marc Pelka:

The young adults, meanwhile, received close mentorship, and intensive services, and pro-social interactions, with the correction professionals. The heart of the program, which I've seen during several visits, is the immersion of young adults in services, in a safe and nurturing environment, to set them up for the community. And on this podcast, you'll hear from leaders in Connecticut's correction system, who helped to launch the Worth Unit, and continue to provide vital leadership to the Program today.

Gillian Caplan:

So it sounds like there are a lot of moving parts in the WORTH Unit, that really all need to work, in-sync, to make this successful. And I think a big part of that is stakeholder engagement and buy-in. So can you talk a little bit about the implementation of this program, and trying to encourage buy-in? What stakeholders were necessary when engaging all these professionals?

Marc Pelka:

Great question. The central stakeholder group, in standing up and implementing the WORTH Unit, is Connecticut's correctional professionals. I had the pleasure of speaking at a graduation, two years ago, of the latest class of correction professionals. And I look out and I see a group of professionals that are facing challenges as never before. And they're applying the research, which shows that outdated approaches of incapacitation and locking people up and throwing away the key, doesn't work. And the Connecticut Department of Correction has developed an approach that better reflects the research and best practice.

Gillian Caplan:

Thank you so much.

Gillian Caplan:

I would love if we could kind of move into the specifics of the WORTH Unit, and bring it to the warden and the captain now. So the targeted age group for the WORTH Unit is women, 18 to 25. Why is this age group so critical to reach, during this program?

Trina Sexton:

This age group is so critical to reach because of what we know on behavior and brain development. Studies on brain development have shown that the human brain continues to develop well past age 18, with neurological maturity occurring somewhere around the age of 25. The incomplete development of the prefrontal cortex, that is the part of the brain that controls impulsivity, combined with the challenges 18 and 25-year-olds face as they navigate from adolescence to adulthood, are several reasons why the program focuses on this age group.

Anna Lussier:

I agree. And by nature, this age group is already sensitive, vulnerable, and easily influenced. They have false senses of invincibility, feel pressure to fit in, by peers, and challenge authority. What factors are linked to criminality, for instance, are a high prevalence of childhood and adult trauma in the incarcerated female population, anti-social attitude, behaviors, and associations. It's critical to respond to this age group with appropriate interventions.

Trina Sexton:

Exactly. Without such interventions, impulsivity drives behavior. We see this represented at the correctional level; statistically speaking, a significant number of incidents that occur within the facilities is attributed to this age group.

Gillian Caplan:

So you've mentioned interventions. And I would love if you could talk about what the different components of the WORTH Unit are? Those interventions? The staff, et cetera?

Anna Lussier:

There are multiple components of the WORTH Unit. All staff involved in the WORTH Unit have completed a specialized, three week, Incarcerated Young Adult Training, as a means of preparing them to work with this unique population, and to fully capture the restorative living nature of the WORTH Unit.

Anna Lussier:

The unit is heavily staffed; more than a general population housing unit. The staffing allows for increased opportunities of involvement. Staff can focus on conflict resolution, restorative circles, and enhanced communication, within the community. Engagement in this pro-social activities, all resulting in elevated self-esteem and self-worth.

Anna Lussier:

The higher, staff to incarcerated individual, ratio, in the WORTH Unit, makes it possible for staff to take this more involved role in the restorative justice process. This is directly in line with the new way of corrections, all the while maintaining the safety and security of the unit.

Trina Sexton:

And after the staff, there are the women themselves; both those in the 18 to 25 age group, and those who serve as the mentors. The cross-generational structure of work, pairs older incarcerating women, who have life experience, and want to use that experience and their training to help guide younger women, through their growth and hard work. And by hard work; young women have to apply to the unit, make the investment, and have an active role and input in their reentry and program plans.

Trina Sexton:

These program plans are developed through the use of the WRNA, which is an assessment instrument validated for use on incarcerate women. This is another key component of the WORTH Unit, and is used, along with the input of the women, to identify meaningful interventions and supports to help them acquire the tools for success, in a safe and positive environment.

Anna Lussier:

That positive environment is inclusive of family. Another part of the WORTH Unit recognizes this strong relationship between incarcerated young adult women and their families in the community, and places a strong emphasis on family engagement for all WORTH residents.

Anna Lussier:

It's also to important to point out that by "family", we're referring to any person who has a healthy relationship with the young women, and can influence or support her growth and success. All WORTH mentors and mentees have the opportunity to have these significant figures in their lives, become involved in her family engagement and overall treatment, while in the WORTH Unit.

Anna Lussier:

Family engagement is proven to strengthen bonds, increase healthy communication, and aid in the restoration of relationships, in a safe environment, prior to release. This opportunity significantly increases the likelihood of success, upon release, back into the community.

Trina Sexton:

And the community is also a major component of the WORTH Program. Volunteers, and our partners, enhance the sense of community that is a fundamental piece to this unit. These volunteers and providers not only offer essential programs and services to the women, but help them establish critical connections, and maintain engagement with their respective communities. This sense of belonging and investment from the community, before they set foot out the door, here, helps facilitate a supportive transition when they return.

Gillian Caplan:

You've touched on this briefly, as far as the mentee and mentors' program, but why are mentors such an importance piece of this program?

Anna Lussier:

I believe that mentorship is such an important piece, because of the aspects of relatability and similarities, which help develop a sense of understanding that may not be attainable by staff that have not experienced the struggles of incarceration. Most of the mentors who are part of the WORTH Program, either committed a crime, or were incarcerated at this age. This allows for them reflect upon their experiences, and bring valuable perspective, and provide support to the young women in the program.

Anna Lussier:

The mentorship role serves dual purposes; it's not only a strength-based approach to guide the young women in their growth, but also an essential component of empowering all women. This is echoed in feedback from the mentors of the WORTH Program, how it invokes a feeling of self-worth, a way for them to give back, feeling more accountable for their own actions. They feel it's important in several areas, because they have a responsibility to uphold, and something to look forward to. They're able to give back to their community, both, in the program and outside the walls, in the hopes of making a difference in families, and people important to the mentees.

Gillian Caplan:

All of this already sounds like major successes. But I would love if you could touch on some of the more tangible successes, not necessarily anecdotal, that you've seen throughout the implementation of the WORTH Unit?

Trina Sexton:

I think most people would measure success on how well this program reduces recidivism. But this program has taught us that success is measured in some many other ways as well. Connecticut state and agency leaders are trailblazers in criminal justice reform, and have been successful in many other initiatives of this caliber. With such a focused climate on reentry, in the state, we were perfectly positioned to implement the nation's first specialized program to address the risk and needs of the young adult female population.

Trina Sexton:

With such an in-depth program, it is anticipated to have significant impacts on recidivism. But this program has only been operating a few short years, and while we do not have sufficient data to determine long-term impacts, what we do know is promising. Since the inception of the program, six mentors and 64 mentees have been released. None of the mentors have returned, and nine mentees have been re-incarcerated, so it's approximately a 14% recidivism rate. This early data indicates a significant reduction in recidivism, when compared to the overall rate of recidivism in the state.

Anna Lussier:

In addition to positive outcomes, another success is the improvement in staff wellness. This is one of our agency's top priorities. Staff are more positive at work. I've seen them develop a close-knit culture among their coworkers. And they have increased confidence, because of the skills they acquired during training.

Anna Lussier:

Staff feel a sense of pride and career satisfaction, when they realize their contributions and investment in the program are helping women in the WORTH Program achieve their family, education, and career, and personal goals, after incarceration.

Trina Sexton:

Agreed. It's a tremendous sense of achievement.

Trina Sexton:

For the women, their transformation is one of the biggest successes. These women often enter the doors of York, broken, with histories of trauma, no sense of self-efficacy or self-worth, no understanding of healthy relationships, and little to no skills. The women are flourishing in this program, due to the principles of restorative justice, and age and gender specific supports. They may enter, broken, but we want them to leave as strong, confident women.

Gillian Caplan:

Absolutely.

Gillian Caplan:

As with any program of this magnitude and innovation, there's going to be some obstacles. So if you could talk a little bit about what some of those obstacles and challenges that you've encountered, when setting up this program initially, as well as continuing to implement it?

Anna Lussier:

Building the first specialized unit for emerging adult females was a challenge because there was no precedent to follow. We knew what worked with the males, but as history has shown, practices developed on the males and simply applied to females, do not always work.

Anna Lussier:

Staff have become familiar with phrases, "Build the plane while flying it," and "Operating in the gray areas." Gray, in the sense that, the unit philosophy and practices was a complete departure from the corrections as it was known in Connecticut. Correctional staff that were primarily focused on safety and security, have expanded their roles into uncharted territory, that involves engagement and support of the incarcerated population; roles normally undertaken by counseling and social workers in the agency.

Anna Lussier:

The notion of working in the gray was unprecedented, and took some time for the staff to adjust. Solely over time, and with the collaboration of all staff and partners involved in the WORTH Unit, it was learned through trial and error, and what works, and what practices were not so effective. The unit staff have continuously grown, and increased their confidence and preparation, over time.

Trina Sexton:

We did have some initial growing pains. And when you think about the forming, storming, and norming of group development, we've certainly spent our time storming. I think this has helped to strengthen the unit, though, to weather obstacles in the next storm, which has been the global pandemic. This greatly affected the WORTH Unit, and disrupted family and community engagement. With funding made available through the pandemic, we had to adapt to make these vital connections in a virtual capacity.

Trina Sexton:

The program is also adapting to a changing population, due to COVID. Connecticut has seen a substantial reduction in the overall prison population, and while a decrease in the prison population is obviously a very good thing, it does present certain challenges in identifying mentors and young women to participate in the program.

Trina Sexton:

Generally, a low census is also a good thing, but when it comes to sustainability, it can be difficult to maintain funding or momentum for unit initiatives. Low census does not mean low need, and it is important to remember that, not necessarily the quantity of women served, but the quality and the impact to the women, their families, and the community, this program delivers.

Gillian Caplan:

As you said, you were building the plane while flying it, and now you're building the plane while flying it in a global pandemic. So there's a lot of moving components. But a big part of that is shifting the culture, particularly in something so innovative. Would you mind discussing the role of culture change in guaranteeing the success of the WORTH Unit?

Trina Sexton:

It may be necessary to describe the previous, long ingrained culture of corrections, prior to the implementation of the WORTH Unit. What was referred to as "the custody treatment divide," described the two main disciplines of facility staff; you were other custody staff, or you were treatment staff, and whatever your discipline, you generally stayed in your lane.

Anna Lussier:



The culture change that followed as the WORTH Unit was implemented, and to this day involves blending of the custody and treatment disciplines, and a mutual respect for the roles of all staff. As an example of this blending of roles, in addition to traditional monitoring of the population, officers are now participating in activities with the women, such as basketball, and completing a puzzle, and have an active role in their personal growth. Officers now have an active role in the unit team, and regularly participate in collaborative problem solving efforts with the social workers, the counselors, supervisors, and the women in the program.

Trina Sexton:

Culture change encompassed more in depth training than any other facility trainings, and buy in from our union partners, and the staff. These elements were key to the WORTH Unit's success.

Gillian Caplan:

Now that you have seen that success, you've dealt with the culture change, you've dealt with building the plane while flying it, how do you plan to ensure sustainability and long-lasting success of the WORTH Unit? And do you see an opportunity for expansion to other prisons?

Anna Lussier:

Expansion to other prisons has begun throughout the world, including several states in the U.S.. The benefits of continued expansion reach beyond the program participants and staff, to the healing of families, and to the communities.

Trina Sexton:

And I think, focusing on the benefits to the women, their families, and the community, is the key to program sustainability. The program must continue to adapt, to evolve, and to respond to the changing needs of incarcerated young women. This may require viewing social issues, especially post-pandemic, through a different lens. It will require macro and micro level perspectives on social issues and movements, as well as evaluations for program efficacy.

Trina Sexton:

At the foundation, programming must continue to include mentorship, be trauma informed, age and gender responsive. Specialized staff training must continue to be prioritized to ensure sustainability.

Gillian Caplan:

I feel like we've learned so much today.

Gillian Caplan:

And then, one final question. And I'll push this to Undersecretary Pelka. Does the Byrne JAG project planning efforts, include opportunities for further partnerships with the Department of Corrections?

Marc Pelka:

Absolutely. The Department of Correction, in Connecticut, brings forward innovative and thoughtful ideas for how well-timed, focused, Byrne JAG investments could help to stand up programs like the WORTH Unit. As a state administering agency for the state of Connecticut, I am looking forward to

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reengaging critical stakeholders in Connecticut's Criminal Justice System, to develop plans, and engage and hold discussions, and help to shape available Byrne JAG investments for the upcoming years ahead.

Gillian Caplan:

Thank you all, so much, for joining me today. I feel like we learned a lot. And I'm really excited to see what you all do next.

Speaker 1:

Thanks again to Undersecretary Marc Pelka, Warden Trina Sexton, and Captain Anna Lussier, for taking the time to tell us about Connecticut's WORTH Unit.

Speaker 1:

To hear more podcasts discussing promising practices and programs that have been funded through, or could be funded through, Byrne JAG awards, visit us at [ncja.org](http://ncja.org).

Speaker 1:

Thank you.